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MARSTON, WEBSTER, AND THE DECLINE OF THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

In Rupert Brooke's posthumously published monograph on *John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama*, his Cambridge fellowship-dissertation, the most interesting chapter is that entitled "The Elizabethan Drama," wherein he makes a rapid survey of the entire period, evaluates the various types of plays which were produced, accounts for the successive changes of artistic fashion and temper, discusses the causes which at length brought about the Jacobean degeneration, and fixes the place of Webster in relation to the organic growth and decay of this then dominant literary form. It is a brilliant if somewhat consciously clever piece of work, and while it smacks of youth throughout, with all youth's violent personal likes and dislikes and impatience of error and received opinion, it will be welcomed, as will the judgment of any creative writer in regard to a field which has had all-too-little fresh, vital criticism that is neither tradition-ridden nor stifled with the dry dust of pedantry. In the present instance I believe the statements of Brooke, even where incorrect in themselves, are suggestive, when taken in conjunction with the half-truths of other investigators, of verities which have hitherto been insufficiently pointed out.

After the dawn-song of Marlowe, says Brooke in substance, the drama passed through a "period of silliness or undistinguished prettiness," during which time the respectively stupid and insincere chronicle histories and romantic comedies made up the great bulk of production. This lasted for some ten years. Then came "the wonderful, sultry flower-time of the next century." "For there was a period—1600-1610 are the rough inside limits—that stood out an infinity above the rest. Nearly all the good stuff of Elizabethan drama was in it or of it. Except in comedy (with which Brooke avows himself not concerned), there are only the lonely spring of Marlowe and the Indian summer of Ford outside it."

Brooke sees the cause of this flowering in a reaction from "the

Renaissance joy in loveliness, the romantic youthfulness of the age, the wave of cheerful patriotism." "Poets, and men in general, had reached a surfeit of beauty." Cynicism and despair, a complexity of soul and a morbid and introspective imagination, awoke and found artistic expression; but with them came sincerity and power, for the veils of romanticism were rent away, and men looked steadfastly upon stark life and without dismay into its darkest recesses of passion, crime, and mental disease.

"The main current of strength in the drama during these years . . . is that which ran through Marston and Tourneur to Webster." "Marston is one of the most sinister, least understood, figures in Elizabethan literature. More than anybody else, he determined the channels in which the great flood of those ten years was to flow." He was pre-eminently a satirist, whose chief passion was truth, which he preferred if it hurt, but loved in any circumstance. He resuscitated the old blood-and-thunder revenge tragedy, gave it a *macabre* taste, and with the violent and ensanguined satire in which he clothed it, "lit up those years like a vivid flash of lightning." "He may have originated the heroine who was wicked or non-moral, fascinating and not a fool." "Filth, horror, and wit were his legacy." Tourneur, who is really far the inferior of Marston, "with his brilliant and feverish morbidity carried on the line. But Tourneur was in sight of the end of greatness."

Brooke finds dissolution inaugurated with the "fatal reign" of Beaumont and Fletcher, or rather of Fletcher, for he testifies to the humor, poetry, and fundamental strength of Beaumont. The twenty years' suppression of the theatre during the Civil War and the Commonwealth was of slight importance as a break in the course of English drama, he declares, beside the great gulf that yawned in its path about 1611. "Five years before that, England was thunderous with the most glorious tragedy and the strangest passion. Five years after that, Fletcher and the silly sweetness of tragi-comedy were all-powerful. The path, unmistakably the same path, led on and down, through Massinger and Shirley." Grandeur became prettiness, seriousness the mere desire to please, splendor softness, and tragedy tragi-comedy.

"But even when the triumph of prettiness was on its way to completion, there was one slightly old-fashioned figure still faithful to that larger prime The stream swept straight on from Marston and Tourneur to Webster. With him the sinister waves, if they lost something of their strange iridescence, won greater gloom and profundity. After him they plunged into the depths of earth. He stands in his loneliness, first of that long line of 'last Elizabethans.' As the edge of a cliff seems higher than the rest for the sheer descent in front of it, Webster appears even mistier and grander than he really is, because he is the last of Earth, looking out over a sea of saccharine."

It is quite common nowadays to hold Fletcher responsible for the decline of the old drama. The world loves a scapegoat, on whom the blame for anything bad or unfortunate may be placed; and here, particularly, seems to have felt the need of some one to bear the burden. It used to be Ben Jonson, perhaps because the ideals which dominated his work were evidently so different from Shakespeare's; now it is Fletcher who must stand "as the figurehead for our abuse." There was much to provoke such a selection about that brilliant, spoiled child of fortune, who had the ability to do anything but the will to do nothing, that artist cursed with facility, that genius who refused to take himself seriously and labor at a play with conscientious care—who would stoop to any theatric charlatanry, if only he might thereby thrill or please. One finds a pleasure in fastening any charge upon the man who *could* write the first half of *Valentinian*, and then *would* write the last half of it. The modern discovery of how little he contributed to the best of those plays for which he had so long received half-credit through the ascription of their authorship to the firm-name of "Beaumont & Fletcher," has caused a reaction against him in favor of his more talented junior partner. And then one feels instinctively that tragic-comedy, with which his name is associated with special prominence, must (as a patently vicious literary form) be in some way at the bottom of all the trouble.

Brooke, however, seems to be alone in his diagnosis of exactly what was the evil, inaugurated by Fletcher, which the Elizabethan drama fell sick and died of. And his view that it was an emasculated prettiness, a cloying sweetness, does not square with the facts. These characteristics are indeed too palpable in the work of Fletcher himself, as to some degree in Beaumont's, but in that of none of their distinguished contemporaries or successors, save perhaps Shirley. The beauty of Ford's verse is not warm and "sirupy," but cold—like carved marble. How could anyone consider the grave, plodding Massinger a current in that "sea of saccharine" which Rupert Brooke talks about? Or the austere, bitter Middleton, or "rough Rowley, handling song with Esau's hand"? Nor, again excepting Shirley, do the last of the old dramatists have many of the other mannerisms that we think of as most characteristic of Fletcher. It was Shakespeare, not Fletcher, who appears to have initiated the extreme metrical license of the later days. No—the facts should be clearly recognized: Fletcher is not responsible for any great share of the shortcomings of those who followed him; his sins of artistry, which were many and grievous enough in all sooth, for the most part died with him.

The more usual charge against Fletcher and the Jacobean drama is that with them, and through tragi-comedy in particular, mere sensationalism rather than the reproduction of life became the object of the playwright.¹ This theory has been most clearly and subtly elaborated by Mr. Paul Elmer More in *The Nation*, April, 24, 1913, who (assailing Beaumont and Fletcher equally) says the downfall of tragedy began when "the theme was altered from a single master passion to a number of loosely co-ordinated

¹Mr. Barrett Wendell, however, discovers the cause of the degeneration of the drama in "the crushing sense of fact" which, he says, throttled the author with the consciousness of his limitations and cooled his imagination. And (oh, Rupert Brooke!) as an example of this decadence, he takes Webster's *White Devil*! [*William Shakspeare*, page 408 f.] It is not very clear to me just what Mr. Wendell means by this "crushing sense of fact," or how *any* sort of a sense of fact *could* be other than a virtue in a dramatist.

passions," in the working out of which "they loosed the bonds of conduct and left human nature as a mere bundle of irresponsibilities."² Professor Gayley of the University of California, indeed, while accepting Mr. More's analysis of the baleful influence, demurs against the affixment of the blame for this upon the "twin-dramatists," or even upon Fletcher. "To substantiate such a charge," he says (*Beaumont the Dramatist*, p. 399), "it would be incumbent upon the critic to prove not only that the decadence is indubitably visible in the joint-work of Beaumont and Fletcher, but that . . . it was not already patent in the dramatic productions of their seniors"; and goes on to instance various plays in which he believes it may be discerned: *The Royal King and Loyal Subject* of Heywood; *Bussy D'Ambois* and *The Gentleman Usher* of Chapman; *The Malcontent*, *The Dutch Courtezan*, and *The Insatiate Countess* of Marston; and *The White Devil* of Webster himself.

The longer and more fixedly one gazes upon the later Jacobean and Caroline drama, the more satisfied one becomes that its chief defect, aside from a sheer paucity of genius in those days as compared with the earlier time, is just that loose coördination of theme and passions which Mr. More has so unerringly pointed out. Rupert Brooke himself seems to have some comprehension of this when he speaks of "the absence of any serious intention, the only desire to please, the lack of artistic morality" as characteristic of the "fifth-rate stuff" which "overwhelmed England." Take the *Bonduca* of Fletcher as an example. Around the disastrous war of Boadicea the author has merely *dangled* (not *twisted*) several

² But most of that majority who hold this view are hardly consistent. The very critics who especially blame Fletcher for the mischief are they who exalt Beaumont most highly above him in the early joint plays of the two dramatists. Then it was Beaumont who invented the vicious type and thereby sowed the first seeds of decay, unless— Here again these same critics do not bring their opinions to a final synthesis; for most of them (in my judgment, wrongly) hold that *Cymbeline* antedated *Philaster*, and consequently that the influence was from Shakespeare to Beaumont, and not the other way; therefore their own premises require them logically to conclude that it was Shakespeare who inaugurated the decline of the Elizabethan drama!

threads of incident, details in the lives or deaths of several characters. The play has no *raison d'être*—save to while away two or three hours of a seventeenth-century afternoon. The very poetry—as is usual with Fletcher, frequently of not inconsiderable merit—yields to the impulse of moment and situation without regard to the truth of its words or their appropriateness in the mouth of the speaker. Or consider more tensely compacted works, such as *The Bloody Brother* or *Thierry and Theodoret*, or Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust*, or Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. The reader is hurried through labyrinths of sinister designs, murders, complicated intrigues, disguises, uncontrolled passions, sensational and harrowing scenes of poignant emotion—most often not of a single plot, in which the excitement might relax a little at times, but of several plots, bundled together so as to keep one keyed up by an endless succession of “thrills.” The author is not content to develop one thing; he must juggle with many things. When a Jacobean playwright wanted to turn out a tragedy, like the hero of Stephen Leacock's *Nonsense Novel* he mounted his Pegasus “and rode off in all directions.”

The world of scholarship owes Mr. More a real debt for his incisive definition of the precise trouble with the drama of those days.

But when was the poison first infused? Mr. Gayley, in his list of productions manifesting unhealthy art prior to Beaumont and Fletcher, appears to stray sometimes from the point. He seems to forget that the specific evil is a loss of unity and a disregard of characterization for the sake of heightened plot-interest, and identifies mere sensational detail or pornographic unpleasantness as a symptom of decadence. In no other way can his indictment of *The Dutch Courtesan* and *The Insatiate Countess* be explained. The former, it is true, through the fell purpose of Francischina and the subtleties, disguises, and revelations of Freevill, does bear a slight resemblance to the revenge-play type, which was especially liable to vicious distortion in the later drama; but its fidelity throughout to a theme and moral purpose announced at the beginning, and the perfectly consistent development of its really striking *dramatis personæ*, lift it above sus-

picion, and, indeed, stamp it as possessed of a merit which has been all-too-inadequately recognized. *The Insatiate Countess* is a perfectly straightforward story, with a humorous sub-plot juxtaposed solely for comic relief; and its one great defect, a lack of any clear revelation of the character of the heroine at the opening of the play and a meagerness of psychologic analysis of her changes of heart during its course, must be set down to simple inadequacy on the part of the author.

As for *The Royal King and Loyal Subject* and *The Gentleman Usher*, their themes are quite those of tragi-comedy, but their handling is altogether different. Though *The Gentleman Usher*, especially, does point the way to the Beaumont & Fletcher type, with its court intrigue, its perilous vicissitudes, its love-theme, and its villainy exposed but not adequately punished, both it and the other play are mainly of a piece with the older drama, in that their actions proceed forthrightly out of one episode into another, instead of through the mazes of plot-complication. *The Royal King and Loyal Subject* is absolutely rambling; while *The Gentleman Usher* strikes a chord of the early nineties with its attempt to excite a childish interest in such details as Strozza's prophetic divination and the naïve cure of Margaret.

Bussy D'Ambois is a more suspicious case. Its plot exploits a protagonist of Marlowesque dimensions, but is essentially that of the later tragedy-of-intrigue variety, and is not conditioned by the figure of the hero. Tamyra seems sufficiently changeable from one mood to its opposite to merit the title of a "mere bundle of irresponsibilities." But here we probably have again just a clumsy-handed dramatist, who is unable to portray convincingly a woman swayed by alternate gusts of passion. What we want is an early *indubitable* instance of the fatal tendency which Mr. More pointed out to be, in its final triumph, the ruin of serious drama. Nor need we search far to find it.

The first work of Beaumont and Fletcher to strike the siren note of dissolution is generally agreed to be *Philaster*. Its date is definitely fixed within the extreme limits of 1608-1610. *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ascribed to Cyril Tourneur, was printed in 1607, and perhaps was written a year or so earlier. This play

alone should be a sufficient refutation of the theory that the decline of the Elizabethan drama, due to a vicious ideal which made plot-excitement, rather than action proceeding from character, the basic desideratum, originated with Beaumont and Fletcher. It is melodrama of the wildest and most sensational variety; and never, even in those times, was so much thrilling matter crowded together within five acts. By the end of Act I we have had Vendice introduced in his disguise into a position where he can begin his long-deferred revenge, the amour between the Duke's wife and bastard, the hint of dissension among the royal half-brothers, Vendice's commission to undertake the corruption of his own sister, and an oath of vengeance by the friends of the injured Antonio. And this rate of incident is maintained! Characters and events are hurried, twisted, and forced to serve the turn. Accident plays its full part in bringing off the unexpected. Gratiana is converted to evil and again to good with unconvincing pliability. Castiza's test of her mother by a feigned yielding anticipates a favorite and especially meretricious stage-trick of Fletcher's. Here, then, is a tragedy displaying all the marks of decadence, and yet antedating its traditional inception by from one to five years.

The vicious type can be found yet earlier. *The Malcontent* of Marston has been placed anywhere between 1600 and 1604. Its theme is the devious attempt of a deposed duke to regain his throne, and therewith, as in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the many intrigues and counter-intrigues of a depraved court. The rôles of Malevole and Mendoza are of considerable dramatic value, and there is a fair degree of humor in the time-serving Bilioso. But the play really exists for exciting plot alone; the characters, if developed, are incidental. Nay, not even plot itself, *as a unit*, is the dramatist's aim, but rather the maximum thrill for his audience at any point he can find it. Therefore Pietro's discovery of his wife's dishonor, which is properly a mere episode or developing link, is disproportionately elaborated with such forceful and extended treatment as to make what follows seem tacked on, and an anticlimax. It is in the early and overshadowing part that the play has its moments of real power and insight; the later

machinations, the kaleidoscopic changes, the veering passions, feigned deaths, masqueradings, and surprises are the very substance of that evil against which Mr. More inveighs. Moral outlines are blurred; Mendoza is merely kicked out; and the reconciliation of Pietro, Aurelia, and Ferneze would be hard to match among all the desperate shifts which the stage has witnessed for the sake of a "happy ending." Save, indeed, for the lack of a dominating love-motif, *The Malcontent* is a perfectly orthodox tragi-comedy.

Prior to this play I do not think we shall find a well-developed case of the malady with which we are concerned. Symptoms, indeed, or partial outcroppings of it occur plentifully in those same first years of the seventeenth century. Most of the plays mentioned by Mr. Gayley as suspicious do have a taint of it. It appears in the conclusion with which Shakespeare spoiled that magnificent beginning of what had promised to be the very fine tragedy of *Measure for Measure*. But if we admit symptoms and partial outcroppings into the scope of our inquiry after the original germ of the evil, we must go back to the very first productions of the Elizabethan drama. After Acts I and II, are not the bonds of conduct loosed in *The Jew of Malta*? Is it not a mere orgy of sensationalism and plot-excitement? Aside from its lack of developed art, wherein do the matter and method of *The Spanish Tragedy* differ from those of *The Revenger's Tragedy*? And what shall we say of the riot of bloody melodramas from *Lochrine* to *Titus Andronicus*? Surely here is "the absence of any serious intention, the only desire to please" as completely as ever disfigured a play of Fletcher's or Shirley's;—and glancing ahead a few years, could we not say the same for most of Heywood and a good deal of Middleton? Whither is our criterion of decadence to lead us?

The truth of the matter is that the degeneration of the Elizabethan drama was to be expected from its very inception, for the seeds of that degeneration were present at, and from, the beginning. The Elizabethan drama was founded upon a false artistic

aim, merely to tell a story on the stage,³ and, save in the hands of genius or by sheer happy accident, it never achieved that effect of totality, never attained to that underlying unity of design, which Aristotle once and for all had pointed out as essential to drama. Accident, of course, may accomplish anything, and the intuition of genius not infrequently demanded some sort of organizing artistic unity.

Marlowe was of supreme importance in the matter of intuitive genius. Critics have extolled his legacy to the English stage of verse-technique, character, emotion, and construction, and have lamented, and speculated on, the loss suffered by literature through his untimely death; yet I doubt if the latter point has ever been sufficiently emphasized, even by the pen of adulation—not as regards the poetic and dramatic quality of what he would have produced if he had lived (there he has had full appreciation, and to spare), but as regards the mighty influence which he probably would have exerted towards the fashion of a more compacted form of play than the Elizabethan theatre ever beheld. What he actually accomplished in that direction during his lifetime may appear small, but in view of the stage-technique which obtained when he began to write, it must be pronounced tremendous. The great point is that he found his unity, not in plot alone, but in plot conditioned by character and passion. *Tamburlaine* is built around a character and a passion; it can scarcely be said to have a plot at all. Previous plays concerned with a king had been built around him only in the sense that they told the *story* of his reign. Then in *Dr. Faustus* Marlowe discovered soul-struggle as the basis of serious drama; he was correlating character and intricate plot in *The Jew of Malta*, before something went wrong with it; and finally in *Edward II* he made a near approach to real tragedy, at once complex and unified and with but few flaws, out of what was the most inchoate of all dramatic forms, the chronicle history,—giving it a structure which was never surpassed in solidity by any play of that type in all the rest of English literature. The

³ This aim is first clearly pointed out and demonstrated in *The Development of Shakespeare as a Dramatist*, by Mr. George Pierce Baker.

pioneer of the movement, and he went so far as that in five or six years! With his potent personality, always dominant in influence over his fellow playwrights, what might not Marlowe have made of Elizabethan drama (and consequently of the rest of English drama also, which has been largely under the spell of the Elizabethan tradition), had he continued to live and develop in the direction in which he was going? Something, perhaps, almost Greek in *solidity*, though of course with the *austerity* of Greek tragedy he owned no kinship—something, perhaps, like what Stephen Phillips tried in vain to do. Certainly, we may say, Marlowe had more of the instinct for dramatic concentration than any other man who wrote for the old theatre—distinctly more than Shakespeare, who seems continually to have been chafing under the limitations of the dramatic form and trying to relax their rigidity, as in the *Henry IV* and *V* plays, and in the last “romances.”

Yet Shakespeare's own artistic intuition was better than his impulses. In serious drama he walked, for the most part, in the path pointed out by his predecessor, and as his powers of self-criticism were as far superior to Marlowe's as were his poetic genius and his insight into character, he went a long way beyond him in actual achievement of dramatic structure. His great tragedies may indeed “tell a story on the stage,” but for all their profusion of detail they are as true to the fundamental principles of play-architecture as are the best works of the Attic theatre. Action and character are interdependent, are bound up together, and produce and condition each other. How far Shakespeare's masterpieces were the result of a conscious theory, it would be difficult to say; but the fact remains that they satisfy all the basic requirements of good dramaturgy.

Ben Jonson was another who kept mainly in the right road, for his devotion to classical models and standards safeguarded him. And so—*pace* Mr. More—did Beaumont and Fletcher in the two finest productions of their joint work, where Beaumont seems to have held the reins. In neither *The Maid's Tragedy* nor *A King and No King* is unity of theme or consistency of character violated for theatric excitement. In the former play the in-

terest is centered in no one figure, to be sure; but a single complication is worked out to a logical end, and in spite of several exhibitions of bad taste — e. g., the weakly sentimental rôle of the "Maid," the circumstances of the King's murder, and the management of the final scene—a real work of art is achieved. Even the conversion of Evadne, a reversal of character which we might expect would be arbitrary and unconvincing (especially since it is in Fletcher's hands), can be defended as good psychology.⁴ This tragedy is distinctly notable for its dramatic morality, its nexus between guilt and *dénouement*—the very point where most of the later productions of the Elizabethan stage were weak. The King's tragic error is obvious, Evadne's no less so. Amintor's is found in his pliancy before authority: first and most in his desertion of Aspatia at the royal pleasure (with even some transfer of his affections, it would seem), but also in his tameness and irresolution under his outrageous fate. Melantius (shown, from the very beginning of the play, headstrong and violent) obeyed the voice of passion and would not consider whether he really did right; consequently the result of his course was the deaths of his sister and his friend, and the turning of life into a thing unendurable to him. Aspatia is a leaf caught in the storm.

A King and No King has been seriously condemned for its conclusion, but the failure there to enforce a moral view-point is the result rather of absorption in the lovers' deliverance than of a false dramatic concept. Always throughout the play till then, ethical values have been stressed, and Beaumont has been at some pains to heighten the effect of the terrible fall of Arbaces and Panthea by previous exhibition of the self-confidence of each. Nowhere, indeed, does that author show such ambition to paint character as in the careful presentation of his hero during the first two acts. So far from being concerned entirely with the plot, he here seems to be interested in portraiture almost for its own sake alone.

⁴ See G. C. Macaulay's chapter on *Beaumont and Fletcher* in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, Vol. VI, p. 143.

There are a few other late plays—notably *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Changeling*—in which the relation of plot to character is healthy, but it may be questioned if this excellence did not result fortuitously from the nature of the dramatic fable rather than by deliberate design of the author.

Meanwhile, all these years the great bulk of Elizabethan drama had been floundering along as best it might. Rupert Brooke has paid his disrespects to the "chronicle histories." There can be no question about the badness of this type as a form of art, but in some ways their influence was for good. They dealt with the real deeds of real people, given as plot-data, and it was the task of the dramatist to make persons and events vivid by plausible motivation. Fact thus established a rough sort of safeguard against extravagance and unnaturalness, and psychologic investigation was encouraged. The re-creation of English history played no small part in the development of those powers in Shakespeare which later made possible *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

But the chronicle plays had their vogue and passed out of fashion, and there came a time when the art of plotting was mastered to such a degree that the playwright was no longer content to build up his story by adding incident to incident, but could skillfully heighten the interest by employment of suspense, surprise, complex intrigue, and the involved combination of several motifs. It was at this point that the note of dissolution was first clearly sounded. So long as construction was naïve and straightforward, there could be little temptation to the dramatist to sin against portraiture or psychology; and indeed these were necessary; for plot alone, artlessly developed, could not sufficiently entertain his public. But given the conception which the Elizabethans had, of a play as *a story presented on the stage*, it was inevitable that whenever such story-presentation reached a point of improvement where intricate plots could be set forth and by their intricacy alone hold the theatregoers, every other consideration would be cast aside in the endeavor to tell the most interesting and exciting stories.

And this was just what occurred, the change beginning about the turn of the century. In place of the logical cause-and-effect

sequence whereby events were the consequences of human actions which would naturally produce them, and action grew out of character, and character was self-consistent,—chance came to play a more and more important part in the vicissitudes of plot, for chance could not be anticipated, and so kept the audience on tip-toe;—or if an event did proceed from the deliberate will of a character, it could gain the desired element of surprise if the volitional impulse of that character were something unexpected from him. Thus the bonds of the dramatic fable and the bonds of conduct alike were loosed.

Novelty and excitement were the watchwords of the new tendency. In the search after them, authors were forced more and more to the employment of the strange, the ghastly, the sensational. The wildest extravagances, the most blood-curdling horrors, abnormal moods, strained sentiments, and exaggerated emotions became their stock-in-trade. But there is a limit to invention. New things to please the jaded palate of an audience habituated to highly-seasoned fare could not be found forever. And the day came when all plot-material seemed to the dramatists to be exhausted, and with flagging zeal they began to use the old ingredients over again in new combinations. Their work was perfunctory, inspiration was dead, and the end in sight. Shirley rings the changes on familiar themes with a skillful hand, but without sincerity or interest. One feels he is making his plays, not out of life, but from a mass of conventional stage-stuff. From the less capable pens of his minor contemporaries the output is a sorry thing indeed. And when a man like Ford appears, with real instincts for drama and an absorption in psychology that would have made him welcome the character-tragedy of earlier days, the fashion of the times is too strong for him. One play, indeed, he does base upon character and emotion, but he chooses as the mainspring of this a passion of unspeakable morbidity, and encumbers it with luridly sensational devices and a number of extraneous intrigues; while elsewhere⁵ he probes the heart

⁵ I am speaking of his romantic dramas, not of *Perkin Warbeck*, which, as a rather spineless attempt to revive the outworn chronicle history play by a man whose real interest was almost wholly in the dissection of mind and soul, is neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring, and stands quite apart from his other work.

by flashes only, being usually quite lost amid the mazes of plot-ramification, wherein human nature dissolves into "a mere bundle of irresponsibilities."

I have said that a turn in this direction of eventual ruin was inevitable for Elizabethan drama, the Elizabethan idea of a play being what it was, as soon as plot-technique reached a certain stage of sophistication. But there was a playwright who inaugurated the fatal change, and who more than any other can be regarded as having occupied a causal relationship towards it. That man was John Marston. It is truthfully said that he was one of the most sinister, least understood figures in the literature of the period, and that he, more than anyone else, determined the channels in which the great flood of the first ten years of the seventeenth century was to flow. One of the most valuable suggestions in Rupert Brooke's monograph is his tribute to the power, originality, and influence of Marston, but he seems entirely to have misinterpreted the significance of this dramatist's contribution.

Marston with his *Antonio's Revenge* brought back the Revenge Play into favor and fashion—a type which above all other types was liable to take to itself the qualities which characterize Elizabethan tragedies of the decadence; for the shifts and stratagems of a revenge require a considerable amount of that plot-complication which we have seen would be sure to result in a stage devoted to the production of thrills rather than the reproduction of human nature; such a play depends to a great extent upon the interest aroused by the machinations with which it deals; and the incidents of its fable are likely to be bloody and sensational. Marston, for his part, was very clearly aiming at stage effect, not at the setting forth of a realistic story. He combines the revenge-for-a-father and revenge-for-a-son motifs, along with a love interest, in one play. Every act has its startling situation or tableau. Moral values are outraged: Antonio slaughters the innocent Julio. Motivation is disregarded: there is no reason why Antonio should forbear to stab Piero before the tomb—none save that to do so would prevent a more striking climax later on.

Antonio's Revenge, which probably appeared in 1599, was the

first of a long revival of revenge plays. The fact that *Hamlet* was among them must not blind our eyes to the vicious tendency they imposed upon the drama. And leaving *Hamlet* out of the bargain, we find they all lent their weight to that tendency, from the *Hoffman* of Chettle, down through the previously discussed *Revenger's Tragedy*, to the very latest examples of this kind of play. But *Antonio's Revenge* did more than initiate a new stage-fashion by its melodramatic appeal. It located its sensational story in Italy.

Italy stood for strange things to the Elizabethans. Shakespeare has shown the brighter side of its suggestion in the *Two Gentlemen*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Much Ado*. But the peninsula was not only the land of love and flowers, but the country of Machiavelli and the Borgias. At the name of Italy there blazed in outlines of flame before the imaginations of English playwrights the corruption of courts, monstrous desires, ruthless and stealthy slayings, treachery, and factional struggle; and these things seemed to hold a terrible fascination for the men of that time. The proportion of dramas of murder, lust, and intrigue which made Italy their scene is portentous. Murder, lust, and intrigue—she was a storehouse full of just those materials; and the opening of that storehouse made possible, as it might not otherwise have been possible, the establishment of a school of tragedy which sought no higher reactions in its audience than tension and shock. Upon the rôle played by Marston a lurid gleam is cast by the statement of Swinburne that he was the most Italian of all the Elizabethans. Throughout his career, his influence steeped the stage with the flavor of Italy. First it was in the two *Antonio* plays, then in *The Malcontent*, and finally in *The Insatiate Countess*.⁶

It was Marston, then, who revived the tragedy of revenge, with

⁶ His only other tragedy, *Sophonisba*, though neither a revenge play, nor Italian, nor tragi-comic like *The Malcontent*, does possess its share of taint: its episodes are put in for interest and variety rather than in the cause of logical plot-development; Erictho and the ghost of Asdrubal are not intrinsically connected with the theme; they are thrown in as a sop to the popular thirst for horrors.

its inevitable development of those very features which, given the then current conception of a play, must lead to literary insolvency. It was Marston who with hitherto unexampled boldness made of dramatic incident a mere bid for sensationalism. It was Marston who woke the fevered imagination of his contemporaries to brood upon the traditional vices of Italy. It was Marston who, as we have seen, produced in *The Malcontent* what was the first genuine tragi-comedy in every requisite of the type save the presence of a dominating love-story,—the first unmistakable outcropping of that tendency which utterly debauched Elizabethan drama: namely, the exaltation of intricate plot-structure, with tense vicissitudes and veering interests, over every consideration of character-drawing and unity of design.

And from Marston, says Rupert Brooke, the stream swept straight on to Tourneur and Webster. So it did; but in a sense far other than that which Brooke had in mind. For in both of those two plays “which definitely and uniquely gave the world Webster” the method of Marston and Tourneur is dominant. Dramatic construction they may scarcely be said to have; they are simply and sheerly “stories told on the stage.” Their only real unity is one of atmosphere—the miasmatic atmosphere of Italy at her worst. They do not leave a singleness of impression on the memory, but rather the recollection of separate, isolated scenes of tremendous power and effectiveness, which loom out of the rather inchoate whole in which they are imbedded.

It is to such scenes (worthy, as fragments, of Shakespeare or of anybody) that Webster owes his reputation,—to them and to two other factors. The first of these is the mordant, gloomy, picturesque power of his verse—always striking the same chords of death and bitterness with a persistency which is overwhelming. It is thus that he achieves his peculiar atmosphere. Brief phrases flash a white light into the most poignant moods of the human soul. The Elizabethan drama was practically introduced to a more modern world by the Romanticists, Lamb and Hazlitt, and afterwards Swinburne and his school; and poetic genius and

fragmentary excellences always appealed to them far more than did total-effect.

The remaining quality which contributes to distinguish Webster in our minds is his power of characterization. Some of the figures that move through his pages seem larger than those of life, cast in the same heroic mold as the protagonists of Marlowe and of Shakespearean tragedy. Always there is a solidity about them, and we are tempted to talk of them as of actual people,—something which we do with only the most completely realized creations in literature. I am not aware that any heroine of the "minor Elizabethans" has stimulated a reader's fancy to weave about her a fiction-tissue of her career before the opening of the play in which she appears, like Mary Cowden Clarke's *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, save the Vittoria of Webster, concerning whom Mr. Hadow speculates⁷ with scarcely less sentimentality than is displayed by some of the apologists of Lady Macbeth. Flamineo, Brachiano and his unhappy wife, little Giovanni, the Duchess of Malfi, and Romelio in *The Devil's Law Case* are examples of the same virile portraiture. They seem to stand out of their frames like the figures in a Rubens, and few of the other *dramatis personæ* of the Elizabethan stage, save Shakespeare's do likewise.

But these manifestations of genius should not obscure for us the true relationship of Webster to his field, nor lead us to confuse his tragedies with a better type of drama. *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are, as I have said above, rather unsuccessful attempts at story-telling; and the strength of individual scenes as compared with that of the whole merely goes to show that the author sought at every step to obtain the maximum possible effect from each situation rather than produce a well-proportioned totality. He was interested in character, indeed, but only as a side-hobby. When it conflicted with a desired turn of the plot or a chance for a striking scene or speech, he sacrificed it, as we observe in the case of Bosola during the torture of the Duchess and in some of the sententious couplets which are strewn here

⁷ In *The Oxford Treasury of English Literature*.

and there throughout his pages. While he used the paraphernalia of horrors with more restraint and artistic subtlety than Tourneur, he crowded enough and far too many of such devices into *The Duchess of Malfi*. His imagination, like Tourneur's, went delving in the charnel-house, to thrill his audience with its crude and ghastly properties: the dead man's hand, the absurd lay-figures of the Duchess's loved ones, the masque of maniacs, and the mummery of the bellman. The election of the Pope in *The White Devil* is lugged in for such passing entertainment as the presentation on the stage of an unfamiliar and spectacular event might afford. The assumed madness of Flamineo is equally removed from the sphere of dramatic necessity. As for the last part of the tragedy, with its tangle of intrigues, disguises, poisonings, and stabbings, not to mention the nauseous complication added by the Moor, Zanche,—it is of a piece with the fourth and fifth acts of *The Malcontent* and with all the worst traditions to which this play gave impetus. There is even, in the final interview between Flamineo and Vittoria, an example of that already noted stage-device which, in the hands of Fletcher and his followers, hurried the later drama to the devil faster than almost anything else: the shamming of a part by one of the characters, whereby a thrilling situation is worked up—and then the revelation that he was merely dissimulating.

And what is the theme of *The Duchess of Malfi*? Not the fate of the Duchess herself, for she dies in the fourth act. Not the unhallowed course of her brothers; for while technically it can be nothing else, *practically* we fail to see and feel this fact, as both Ferdinand and the Cardinal are kept in the background. Not the career of Bosola, for his own portrait is distorted for the sake of the plot. And what place in it has Julia, the Cardinal's mistress? The author was simply presenting a story for the sake of the tension and shock which he could arouse by its successive incidents.

The stream did flow straight on from Marston to Tourneur, and beyond him to their mightier disciple. John Webster was not the final verge-cliff of earth's shore, looking out over a sea of saccharine, for most of what lay beyond him was neither saccharine nor altogether different in substance from himself.

He was not even the last of his tribe to find an interest in character, for so did Middleton and Ford after him. Nor was he a solitary figure who, amid the hurrying dissolution of serious drama, "still remained faithful to that larger prime," for he was of the decadence as well as in it. He did not belong to the brotherhood of Marlowe and Shakespeare and Jonson and Beaumont, they whose work was illuminated by gleams, at least, of that sun of true art which lit the toil of all the masters alike from Æschylus to Ibsen; his place is among the vast throng of the other playwrights of his period, who planned and builded amiss. Had they lived in an age of more enlightened canons and wiser self-criticism, they might have made some notable contributions to the world's literature, for many of them gave evidence of rare talent, and Webster revealed most of all; it must be his melancholy distinction that his was the highest of any of those unrealized capabilities; he was the greatest Elizabethan who labored confusedly in the darkness of false dramaturgic principles and aim.

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